

**National Intelligence Council
NIC 2020 Project
NIC-sponsored Seminar on Asian Responses to the United
States
24 November 2003**

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Introduction

For the past year and a half, the NIC has engaged a group of leading international relations theorists in a series of discussions about “power politics in the age of unipolarity.” At the end of the discussions, the group’s chair, Professor John Ikenberry of Georgetown University, has drafted papers summarizing the discussions. An earlier one—*Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence: Great Power Politics in the Age of Unipolarity*—describes possible future challenges from our allies and partners, including Europe, Japan, Russia, China, India and Brazil.

This paper—summarizing the group’s discussion last November—addresses four questions:

- How might a stronger China behave and what are the implications of that behavior for Asia and the wider world?
- How will other Asian states and the United States respond to a rising China?
- How are other regional powers, such as Japan, Indonesia, and India, likely to develop and behave between now and 2020.
- How might Asia, particularly with respect to the US-Chinese relationship, develop strategically between now and 2020.

Discussion

How Might a Stronger China Behave?

The most commonly cited characteristic of Asian politics is the seemingly inexorable rise of China. Three questions in particular occupied the group as it tried to come to terms with this development. First, will a stronger China seek to increase its influence globally or regionally? In other words, will it seek to directly challenge the United States on a global scale? Second, how will China seek to increase its influence? Third, what could throw China off balance and prompt a change in strategy, perhaps in a more aggressive direction?

Does China have regional or global revisionist intentions?

The group was not united on this but generally tended to support the thesis that China would not seek to emulate the Soviet Union by attempting to construct its own global order. Four reasons were advanced in support of his position. First, China lacks the capacity to challenge unipolarity on a global scale. Crucially, China is without a blue water navy. It has intentions to construct one but no conceivable plan would be sufficient to challenge American maritime power. Second, regional ambitions are within reach but unaided global ambitions are not. Attempts toward the latter may prove to be self-defeating. Third, a true global challenge may prompt a unified American balancing response. A regional challenge, particularly if it is perceived to be legitimately executed,

may divide American opinion, both elite and public, and thus weaken the likely American balancing response. Fourth, China lacks a unifying ideology that could form the basis of the soft power necessary to project power globally.

A dissenting viewpoint does not rule out the possibility of Chinese collaboration with other powers such as a united Europe or Russia in an effort to create a rule-based international order that would stand in contrast to a hegemonic United States. However, the most likely outcome, for the reasons stated above, is that the ambitions of a rising China are highly likely to be regionally focused.

In terms of its relations with the United States, Chinese military intentions are likely to be about raising the costs of entry to the United States to deter American intervention in a Asian conflict or crisis. Thus, it is important to look beyond the raw comparative numbers of Chinese and American military strength and ask whether or not China has sufficient power to achieve these limited goals of regional power projection and deterrence of American intervention.

What form will Chinese regional revisionism take?

There is no one future for Asia given a rising China. How China behaves will help shape how its neighbors and the United States respond, and thus the outcomes may vary depending upon the strategic choices of the parties involved. The group identified three ways in which China may attempt to increase its influence over the next twenty years.

China remains an authoritarian state, increasingly articulates revisionist objectives, and seeks to use its newfound power to achieve them. In some ways, this scenario pictures China behaving like emerging great powers of the past, e.g.

Wilhelm's Germany, the Soviet Union, etc. This scenario is at once the clearest threat to American interests and presents the United States and the region with straightforward choices. It is the scenario that is most likely to prompt an American-supported regional alliance against China.

China remains an authoritarian state with revisionist intentions but respects the rules of the order, works within the existing framework, and seeks to change it by peaceful and legitimate means. In this scenario, China may seek to construct a regional security framework that excludes the United States, it may bind itself in agreements to make its power more acceptable, it may speak softly; all of this it would do with a view to legitimizing its own power and to convince its neighbors that China represents the future, a future in which they have a part. This China will still threaten America's role in the region but it will be more difficult for the United States to convince Asian states of the dangers inherent in this development. Similarly, it will also be much more difficult to secure European backing for a containment policy (including restrictions on technology transfers); why would Europe resist a well-behaved China just to cement and preserve unipolarity? It may also complicate any attempt to rally American public opinion behind a containment regime.

For China this is a counter-avoidance strategy. It is designed to prevent the emergence of a counterbalancing coalition regionally and by playing nice it endeavors to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States. There was a general sense in the group that this strategy would be China's preference.

A related theme is the possibility that the next ten years may see China's message and soft power gaining resonance regionally at the

expense of the United States. As the United States becomes increasingly occupied with dangers, such as terrorism, that are perceived as peripheral at best, middle-ranking Asian states will be courted by an apparently benign power that wishes to talk about the things that matter to them (SARS, economic instability, AIDS, and, crucially, a means of containing its own rising power).

China becomes democratic. A democratic China deprives the United States of a powerful argument against Chinese regional hegemony and may weaken American resolve to confront a rising China. The reason for this is simple. American policy towards trouble spots such as Taiwan is largely premised on a strong preference for peaceful and democratic solutions to political problems.

A democratic China may be a China that plays by, and respects, the rules but that need not necessarily be the case. Strong nationalistic pressures, particularly in the case of a prolonged economic recession, may prompt an aggressive foreign policy to legitimize the sitting government, although that could just as easily occur in an authoritarian China.

What developments could throw China off balance and prompt a change in strategy?

Some in the group expressed the view that as long as China is rising it is unlikely to cause trouble. Why would it? Time only makes it stronger. The sensible strategy is to wait because future conflict will likely be on more favorable terms.

However, China is rising now but it may not always be so. If it continues to grow but then faces a certain leveling off or decline it may be tempted to act to turn its momentary advantage into durable facts on the ground. This may be particularly dangerous and destabilizing if it sees the United States as

likely to grow stronger during its predicted period of malaise. Similarly, economic decline may mean that an authoritarian government may be unable to justify itself to its people on the basis of prosperity; it may have to turn to alternative sources of legitimacy, including nationalism. In a classic diversionary tactic this may lead to a more assertive foreign policy.

Finally, traditionally contentious questions such as a Taiwanese move towards independence could threaten the legitimacy of the Chinese regime and cause it to resort to military force even if that entails a risk of American involvement against China.

How Will Other States Respond to a Rising China?

The group considered a number of questions about how regional and American responses to the emergence of an increasingly powerful China, including whether or not that reaction would be shaped by the way in which China seeks to increase its influence.

Are China's neighbors likely to balance or bandwagon?

There are three factors which will encourage regional bandwagoning towards China. The first is the small size of many of the countries involved, which makes the creation of a counterbalancing coalition very difficult. The second is the giant sucking sound of the Chinese economy which may deter states from directly confronting Beijing for fear of jeopardizing their economic well-being. Finally, the large Chinese communities in other states may exert political influence for a pro-China foreign policy. However, balancing will become more likely if a larger state is involved in spearheading a balancing effort and if China seeks to achieve its goals by force, aggression, and coercion.

A related theme concerns the interaction between economic and political links with China. If China's neighbors increasingly integrate with China economically can they continue to keep security ties to the United States or are these two dynamics mutually exclusive? Can the United States offer a vision of regional order that makes this separation practicable?

How will America's policy toward Asia affect the calculations of China's neighbors?

American disengagement from what matters to the United States' Asian allies will increase the likelihood that they will bandwagon and allow China to create its own regional security order that excludes the United States. As a global hegemon primarily concerned with combating international terrorism, the United States presently offers Asian governments a message of security that is of little relevance to the challenges that those states face. This creates a vacuum which China can attempt to fill. If it does so successfully, and in a way that is non-threatening, it may be able to create a China-dominated regional order that excludes the United States. The key question that the United States needs to ask itself is whether it can offer Asian states an appealing vision of regional security and order that will rival and perhaps exceed that offered by China? Failure to do so will increase Chinese incentives to play a long game, by the rulebook, with the ultimate goal of either excluding the United States from the region or excessively diminishing its power there.

Does the United States have a problem with a rising China per se or just with a rising China that is not democratic?

At present, American concern about rising Chinese power is largely based upon normative rhetoric. That is to say that the United States is concerned about the rise of an

authoritarian state, a state that may use its power to coerce favorable outcomes at the expense of its democratic neighbors. The United States also objects to the manner in which China organizes itself internally by denying full political and human rights to its people.

Is this America's problem with China or does it transcend normative judgments? Should America be concerned with a stronger China regardless of its internal makeup? The group pondered this question on a number of occasions. Some suggested that if the United States were to be excluded from Asia it would have important and detrimental implications for America's capacity to project power globally. The sustenance of an American-led international order may depend upon its continuing status as the only global power. Others argued that any Chinese threats is a direct result of its authoritarian characteristics and if this changed so too would the entire strategic question that the United States is grappling with. However, this question needs to be explored in greater depth, something that may become urgent if China undergoes normatively positive change.

Can the American-led international order accommodate rising non-western powers such as China or India?

As a rising power China will be desirous of increased influence in international affairs. This need not necessarily be incompatible with the American-led international order. To use a business analogy, do China and India want a place on the board or to set up a company of their own? The critical question is whether or not the order is flexible and fungible enough to adjust to a changing distribution of power on a global level. If the order is inflexible the likelihood of political conflict between emerging powers and the United States will increase; if it is flexible it may be possible to forge an accommodation

with rising powers and strengthen the order in the process.

How Might Other Asian Powers Develop Between Now and 2020?

The group also discussed how developments in Japan, Indonesia, and India will affect the Asian security order.

Japan

There are two important points to be made about Japan. First, for Japan, the US-Japan security treaty trumps all, even the constitution. The Japanese place a great value upon this alliance and it is the bedrock of their policy; they do not want to imagine a world without it. This largely explains why relations with the United States have been so good since September the 11th and throughout the Iraq crisis. However, if Japan begins to pay a price in casualties for supporting the United States, the commitment to the alliance could clash with the public's traditional pacifism, possibly leading to political controversy and problems for the governing elite.

Second, modern day Japan is unique and does not easily fit into the realist definition of state and statehood. It does not seek prestige and lacks a traditional nationalistic element in its foreign policy, an element which may be present in other states. Japan in many ways is an example of what can go right, of what can be done. The question is whether or not American leadership and enlightened policy on the part of political elites can export this experience to the rest of Asia in an attempt to replicate the developments in Europe. The glue that would allow anything like this to happen is the continuance of global capitalism which creates porous and open borders leading to the decline of mistrust between states.

Indonesia

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, Indonesia may be a potential troublemaker in Asia. Four reasons were advanced to support this contention. First, Indonesia may not remain a single entity for long; it is a country with severe national identity problems which may greatly complicate maintaining national unity. Second, Indonesia may not be a reliable American ally. There are strong domestic and ideological incentives in Indonesian politics to oppose American grand strategy and these may become increasingly potent over time. Third, democratization in Indonesia is not necessarily irreversible. Here some of the problems resemble those it encountered in the 1950s. A return to authoritarianism should not be considered out of the question. Finally, Indonesia considers itself to be a great Asian power and may seek ways of extending its influence regionally.

India

US-Indian relations may turn out to be a less stable and less predictable version of American relations with France. Ironically, India's democratic character may make it difficult for the United States to deal with in the future, partially because of the individuals that may be involved and partially because of structure. There are a number of questions that need to be answered in order to understand India's emerging place in the world. First, what is India's commitment to multipolarism? Second, what does India want, tangible gains or prestige? Third, is India obsessed with being autonomous and, if so, what are the implications of that?

There are a number of crisis points that could throw India off balance. One obvious one is a conflict, either deliberate or accidental, with Pakistan. A second is the prospect of internal terrorism within India. India has 150 million Muslims who have not mobilized yet; a small

but significant minority might do so at some point.

Alternative Scenarios: How Might Asia Develop Strategically?

The central focus of the group's discussion was China and the implications of its rise. From the ensuing discussion, four possible futures for US-China relations and an Asian security order can be discerned.

China increases its influence peacefully and gradually excludes the United States from Asia.

This is most likely if the United States ceases to effectively communicate with its Asian allies, thus creating a vacuum which would be filled by China. Chinese political liberalization, culminating in democratization, may accelerate this development although it could occur without it. The United States then faces a dilemma. Should China's newfound influence be accepted, resisted, or should a deal be reached by which Chinese influence manifests itself as part of the existing international order?

The United States remains at the center of Asian politics; China gradually increases its economic and political influence but its neighbors opt for security ties to the United States.

This is most likely if Chinese actions are non-threatening, Chinese intentions remain ambiguous, and America offers a vision of regional order that resonates with its Asian allies. This is effectively a continuation of the status quo as China's neighbors both work with, and hedge against, it.

A regional bipolar cold war in which an American-led Coalition resists a rising China.

This is most likely if Chinese intentions are perceived as threatening by its neighbors, if China remains authoritarian, and if, as above, the United States offers its Asian allies a vision of regional order that is relevant to their policy goals. China then faces a dilemma. How should it deal with this counterbalancing coalition? Should it utilize its economic power and diaspora communities to coerce favorable outcomes?

A crisis throws the existing order off balance and its outcome determines whether or not a China or an American-dominated regional order emerges.

There are a number of crisis points, both known and unknown, that may lead to a crisis between China and the United States, including Taiwan, a crisis of legitimacy in China following economic collapse, or oil competition in the Caspian Sea. These crisis points should be thought of as an ever-present danger that is largely extraneous to long-term trends in the region but will nevertheless largely shape those trends if they ever spiral out of control and lead to a severe crisis or conflict.